

Forests grow, owls decline under plan

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PORTLAND, Ore. - A decade after the Clinton administration reduced logging in national forests in the Northwest, scientists have concluded the forests are growing, but the population of the threatened northern spotted owl has declined.

Scientists reported Tuesday that the Northwest Forest Plan, adopted by the Clinton administration in 1994, resulted in an 80 percent reduction in logging on 24 million acres of land in western Washington, Oregon and Northern California.

Since the plan was adopted, medium-aged to older forests have increased by 606,000 acres to 7.9 million acres, or to about 34 percent of all forest land in the region, said Melinda Moeur, program leader for old-growth monitoring for the U.S. Forest Service.

The plan also aimed to protect the threatened northern spotted owl, of which there are about 8,000 pairs in the region.

Officials expected an average annual decline in owl numbers of 3.1 percent until enough habitat grew to stabilize populations. But the actual decline has been steeper in some areas.

Four areas in Washington saw an average 7.1 percent annual decline for the dark brown owls that inhabit forests from central California to Canada. Two study areas in southwestern Oregon saw a slight increase.

Owl populations fared slightly better on lands covered by the Northwest Forest Plan than on state or private lands, said Joe Lint, a Bureau of Land Management wildlife biologist.

Scientists are not sure what is causing the declines, but possible factors include invasion of the spotted owl's habitat by the barred owl, an aggressive cousin from Canada that often drives them off, Lint said. Habitat lost to past logging, as well as wildfires, climate changes and insect infestations are also factors, he said.

The plan also failed to provide the expected timber supply and replace lost timber jobs with jobs in small towns near federal forest lands as promised, said Thomas Quigley, director of the U.S. Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Research Station.

"Many of the impacts were different than predicted," he said.

The forest plan produced an average of 421 million board feet each year - just 54 percent of what was expected, said Susan Charnley, an environmental anthropologist with the forest service.

Charnley said only 400 of the 11,000 timber jobs that have been lost since 1994 can be blamed directly on the fact that less timber has been cut on federal lands in the region. The rest were caused by restructuring in the timber industry, she said.

Compounding the economic impact of lost timber jobs has been the loss of U.S. Forest Service jobs, Charnley said. In the past 10 years, the agency's budget has shrunk, resulting in 36 percent fewer positions.